The Search for New Metaphors

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ABSTRACT

The current economic upswing and apparent full employment give the illusion of prosperity. If accepted prima facie, the Benton Report provides a façade of well-being vis-à-vis the future of libraries. It must be remembered that there are complex demographic factors to consider as we search for new metaphors for library service.

INTRODUCTION

The Benton Report (1996) provides the basis for discussion about the future role of librarians and libraries in the United States of America but characterizes our sociopolitical milieu as "an age of anxiety" (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 4). W. H. Auden's 1948 Pulitzer Prize winning poem, *The Age of Anxiety*, or Leonard Bernstein's Second Symphony used as the score for Jerome Robbins's 1950 ballet, *The Age of Anxiety*, are reflective of the chaos of World War II and the era of the nuclear bomb. However, this half-century old metaphor used to describe the mood of the citizens of the United States on the brink of a new millennium by the writer of the Benton Report is indicative of the degree to which the report misses fundamental realities.

This article will use the Benton Report to suggest new metaphors for our time that reflect the role of librarians and libraries more aptly. First, the United States of America reflected in the report is not the United States of America in which most citizens live. Second, two central issues identified by the Benton Report will be used as a focus of discussion: (1) exploration of the nexus between the library and technology; and

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LIBRARY TRENDS, Vol. 46, No. 1, Summer 1997, pp. 117-128

(2) the evolving role of the librarian. Finally, the need for an aggressive public education campaign to define libraries' roles (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 40) is definitely in order but must be initially reactive.

The United States of America in Which We Live

Throughout the Benton Report, references to "Americans" abound. This commonly used descriptor of citizens of the United States is increasingly distasteful to citizens of Latin and Central America. In this post-NAFTA time of hemispheric upheaval, when the future of libraries and information services is posited, it must be kept in mind that a homogeneous United States is a bygone concept. Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1996) proposes a new map "of the New World Border—a great trans- and intercontinental borderzone, a place in which no centers remain. It's all margins, meaning there are no 'others,' or better said, the only true 'others' are those who resist fusion, *mestizaje*, and cross-cultural dialogue" (p. 7).

While the Benton Report identifies attitudes toward libraries by respondents to a public opinion survey, the respondents described all live in private households and exclude citizens of American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, Asian, or Pacific Islander descent. More disheartening is the enormous weight given to the focus group of eleven suburban white library users. The comments of these eleven are woven throughout the text of the report like a mantra—with one respondent's observation that "libraries should stay just behind the curve" repeated *seven* times.

The persuasively described statements of the focus group do have a seductive appeal. Gated and walled housing developments are proliferating all over the nation and gentrification of some urban neighborhoods provides a visible impression of economic well-being. Although home ownership has remained stable at about 64 percent over the last twenty years, the size of homes has increased by 40 percent (Samuelson, 1995, pp. 52-53). It is easy to understand why the remarks of library users who represent white middle-class affluence dominate the Benton Report. A drive through the expanding suburbs of most United States cities finds the deed-restricted, picturesquely named, enclosed development—complete with golf course and recreation center—a dominant feature of the landscape.

Yet travel a "blue highway" and find mobile homes, farmworker camps, and "affordable" housing for workers that service the fortified middle-class. Detour from the rehabbed urban brownstones through deteriorating low income housing to recognize that the Benton focus group does not speak for all who live in the United States. Real median family income has not grown since 1973, though the effect has been ameliorated by adding family members to the workforce. Those with higher incomes have become more wealthy, while the poor have become poorer in both relative and absolute terms (Bronfenbrenner et al., 1996, pp. 52-53).

Why not replace the solo white suburban litany that dominates the Benton Report with a chorus of diverse voices? By the year 2000 the population of the United States will be 12.2 percent African American; 4.1 percent Asian, Pacific Islander; 11.3 percent Hispanic; .7 percent American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut; and 71.6 percent white (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995, p. 19). A note of diversity does sound in Leigh Estabrook's (1997) article, "Polarized Perceptions," which examines some of the Benton Report data in greater detail with an amplification of opinions by African Americans and Hispanics (p. 47). However, the separation of Estabrook's analysis from the distributed report dilutes her overall impact.

A focus group held in a community such as Monterey Park, California, which in 1990 was 11.7 percent white, 31.4 percent Hispanic, 56.4 percent Asian, and .5 percent African American might give a very different picture of perceptions about libraries. This middle-class community surrounded by Los Angeles freeways is a microcosm of the grassroots meanings of diversity, immigration, class, and ethnicity (Horton, 1995, p. 9).

Some concern was expressed by library leaders in private interviews that, contrary to written statements about the library as a safety net for the "information have-nots," libraries might become marginalized and lose support from middle-class taxpayers (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 12). Perhaps it is for this reason that the report disproportionately reflects the observations of the white affluent middle-class.

Statistical analysis and presentation of polling data often combine to smooth out ambiguity. The proliferation of telecommunications devices to the point that "anytime, anywhere" communication capability seems ubiquitous (at least to Beltway consultants) means that the pollsters failed to recognize that some citizens still do not have telephones and thus were absent from their national survey "that accurately reflects the total population 18 years and older" (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 24). In fact, at least one similar two-county study factored the lack of telephones by the working poor into the research design at the insistence of the counties' library board. Citizens were surveyed at various Wal-Mart locations in an effort to identify a more accurate section of the population (McCook et al., 1992, pp. 168-86). Indeed, an indicator of the growing lack of resources among the poor to establish ongoing telephone service is the growing availability of "phone cards"—especially in urban and rural low-income areas and among migrant farmworker populations. These permit the poor to make calls but certainly leave them out of the pollsters' stratified random-digit replicate sample (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 24).

Poverty issues are among the stated policies of the American Library Association. The "Library Services for the Poor" policy was approved by

the ALA Council in 1991, yet repeated efforts to implement the policy have been tabled while corporate partnerships have been expanded (ALA, 1996, pp. 48-49). Sanford Berman, chair of the Social Responsibilities Round Table Task Force on Poverty Issues, addressing the Advisory Committee to ALA's Office for Literacy and Outreach Services in February 1997, argued persuasively for attention to the "Library Services for the Poor" which members of the Advisory Committee identified as a top priority during 1997-1998 (ALA/OLOS, 1997). However, none of the Advisory Committee members are counted among the library leaders whose voices are heard in the Benton Report.

It will be a hard struggle to sustain attention to the library-related needs of people at the margin, people on the border, people in the micro-republics of the Third World (the "kilombos" of East Los Angeles, Pilsen/Chicago, Little Oaxaca, and the Bronx) (Gómez-Peña, 1996, p. 242), and people who are homeless.

Though no accurate count of the homeless in the United States is available, most researchers agree that, on any given night, 500,000 people are without permanent shelter (Cheney, 1995, p.171). The Welfare Reform laws going into effect in 1997 are sure to expand these numbers. The homeless, a central concern to most public libraries, are not mentioned in the Benton Report, while Bruce Springsteen's (1995) ballad, "The Ghost of Tom Joad," refrains, "the highway is alive tonight, but nobody's kiddin' nobody about where it goes."

It does not seem that Springsteen is singing of the Information Superhighway. It does not seem that the eleven white suburban focus group respondents whose opinions are so fully described in the Benton Report speak for the citizens of the United States who are working two jobs to feed their families or taking reading classes to pass a citizenship test. It does not seem that any attempt has been made to understand, in the words of Michael Morgan and Susan Leggett (1996), "how cultural boundaries are constructed, maintained, subverted, merged, and crossed" (p. xi). There is no convergence of the real United States of America with the nation that the focus group respondents inhabit.

Issues Identified by Library Leaders

The Benton Report devotes one chapter to "Public Visions, Private Reflections" of library leaders. These leaders represent grantees of the Kellogg Foundation Human Resources for Information Systems Management. It is a little unclear in most cases which "leader" provides the statement for each grantee (for instance, who spoke for the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, or National Video Resources, Inc.?) with the exception of the Urban Libraries Council, the University of Michigan, and La Plaza Telecommunity Foundation, whose leaders are men-

tioned by name (Benton Report, 1996, p. 39). It is clear, however, that none of the library grantees are located west of the Mississippi and, though some are national in scope, their leaders reside primarily in New York or the Washington, D.C. area. While these facts do not negate the soundness of the leaders' opinions, the leaders are located in sophisticated upscale urban centers and reflect to a degree the bias of the East Coast. It might be conjectured that the New York-Washington, D.C. corridor is the recon unit for the nation but, then again, this might not be an inexorable truth. In the next section, two central issues identified by library leaders are examined.

The Nexus Between Technology and the Library

The public visions of library leaders include broadly sketched assertions about the linkage and electronic merger of all types of libraries into a single entity, with the elimination of geographic and temporal barriers (Benton Report, 1996, pp. 9-10). But what of other visions for the future of the book and information?

Richard J. Cox (1997) has observed: "The real matter is that we understand, regardless of what might replace the book, the nature of information and knowledge in our society. It is what any society or culture is held together by, the book being a part of the memories and symbols of a society" (p. 55). If books are viewed as information, arguments for their preservation become weak. Replacement by electronic access to data with links to related data, video clips, and audio certainly provide an experience more like Web-TV than the solitary experience of reading. The leaps and connections once made by the individual are made by a thousand helping assumpters who anticipate the user's need for connections and supply it in hypertextual riot.

Entertainment, not information, may be the key feature of our era, observes David Puttnam (1996): "The most effective information technologies, whatever their purpose or content, increasingly depend upon graphic skills, the story-telling techniques, the effects, the music, the marketing strategies; in fact, the whole compelling panoply of entertainment...rapidly becoming the dominant force, 'colonising' the whole world of information with devastating speed and power" (p. 2). To keep up with this demand, libraries, universities, and individuals must invest more and more of their funds in ever more powerful computing resources and less in static items like books. As society encourages instant gratification, speed and volume are favored over integrity and depth (Nethe, 1996, p. 14).

Storage rooms hold 386 paperweights bought four years ago piled upon slide-tape kits and microcard readers. Joachim Krautz (1996) has noted: "One of the insidious characteristics of modern technology is that it is invented to be sold...once we buy into it,...it deprives us of our free-

dom by narrowing our options to a set or pre-programmed choices" (p. 22). Development of digital resources are expensive. Just as with motion pictures, the blockbusters appeal to the broadest common denominators.

Access to digital resources *should* be a function of libraries, but moderation is needed as well as consideration to the imbalance of human and financial resources piled before the altar of bytes. Daniel Mark Epstein's (1996) poignant essay, "Mr. Peabody and His Athenaeum," asks: "When the accountants explain, as they must, that the maintenance of the Peabody Library for a few hundred eccentrics is less cost effective than a new computer system that will be used for thousands, who will stand up to defend the library?" (pp. 175-76).

It need not be a dichotomy, but if the library "as place" becomes the rationale for continuing—why not as a place for books? In "The Fate of the Book," Sven Birkerts (1996) plumbs to the essence between "screen" and "book" technologies. The book represents the ideal of completion, while screen technologies, by way of a circuit, are open and available at multiple entry points. To read from a screen is to occupy a different cognitive environment than when reading a book. "The book has always been more than a carrier of information or entertainment—it has traditionally represented a redoubt against the pressure of public life, a retreat wherein one can regroup the scattered elements of self" (p. 266). Additionally, says Birkerts, "if the screen becomes the dominant mode of communication, and if the effective use of that mode requires a banishing of whatever is not plain or direct, then we may condition ourselves into a kind of low-definition consciousness...a loss of subjective reach" (p. 269). Birkerts not only defends the book against dissolution into coded bits but calls for questioning the rush to interconnectivity: "Certainly the survival of that archaic entity called the soul depends upon resistance" (p. 272).

Most startling about the library leaders' vision as reported in the Benton Report is the seeming unilateral acceptance of the digital onslaught. Print collections were built with care and selectivity over decades, but digital information systems seem to be heralded as an unquestioned solution to all information needs. Part of the vision for the future should include identification of valid sources and items reviewed and subscribed to with the same care and attention that have been given to print. Librarians must remember that "the first virtual reality is that unique near-mystical state created when words are read" (McCook, 1993a, p. 628).

Perhaps one of the most eloquent rationales for digitization appears in *Digital Image Collections: Issues and Practice*, a publication of the Commission on Preservation and Access, by Michael Ester (1996). His assessment of the way to identify items from the collection to digitize reflects

the best skills of collection development. A careful reading of Ester's treatise will reassure those who are concerned about heedless digitization.

The Evolving Role of the Librarian

Libraries are viewed by their leaders as provider and protector of equal access and equal opportunity and as community builder, civic integrator, and community activist in a digital world (Benton Foundation, 1996, pp. 10-11). Of course it is not "the library" that will accomplish these goals, but the people who work in libraries—the librarians. Working together, librarians can create institutions that provide and protect equal access, that help build communities, that integrate civic activities, and that activate change. Rather than separate roles of the library and the librarian, it is more to the point to discuss the types of individuals that will realize these goals.

At the outset, some attention needs to be given to the role of the library as an information safety net for the "information have nots." Characterization of any group of people as "have nots" is a circumlocution that bears examination. J. Robert Hilbert (1996) has written of the need of the affluent to understand the system that perpetrates economic injustice. He notes that programs for the poor look at poor people from the vantage of the middle-class, not the other way around. Such programs are developed not to serve the poor but to adjust poor people so they can fit middle-class structures (pp. 15-17).

The reason produce prices in the United States are so low is that farmworkers who pick crops are still at wages below the level for sustenance. If consumers would be willing to pay a fair price for produce, some of these "information have-nots" might be able to work fewer hours and return to school.

The equal access promoted emphasizes access to digital collections but makes no note of the fact that access via computer is like a vehicle without fuel if one is not literate or if one's language is not English. While it is commendable that "the digital age merely extends the traditional notion of the library as 'the people's university' " (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 10), issues of literacy are more fundamental to the access needs of those in poverty.

So, if the library is to become an information safety net, the people who will make it so, the librarians, must develop an empathy and understanding of the needs of the poor from the vantage point of the poor—not from the vantage point of fitting the poor to meet the structures formulated for them.

The view of the librarian as community builder has merit, but little understanding of the meaning of community is shown in the Benton Report. It is not a new idea that librarians should become intervenors

and activists in the communities they serve. In her thoughtful Occasional Paper, *The Evolution of Library Outreach 1960-75 and Its Effect on Reader Services,* Kathleen Weibel (1982) identified four service styles: (1) making traditional services relevant to a community; (2) participation in the life of the community by the library staff; (3) storefront services; and (4) extension of services through cooperation with other agencies (p. 14). Her paper squarely defines community involvement as a core activity of the librarian.

The focus on technology and more nebulous information provision has wrenched away current understanding of this aspect of librarians' work. The addition of technology and training has been at the expense of the community/library interface. It is futile to identify community building as a goal if staffs are trimmed to support escalating computer costs.

Library leaders see librarians becoming information navigators who can equip the "information have-nots" with the tools and equipment to give them parity with more affluent users (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 11). They also suggest librarians must become involved in community organizations.

These are interesting observations made at a time when some programs of Library and Information Science (LIS) are dropping the word "library" from their title to be able to lay claim to mastery over a broader discipline of "information." The irony that emerges is the fact that everyday people recognize the profession of "librarian" and not "information professional."

Daniel O'Connor and J. Phillip Mulvaney (1996) have made a clear case for the viability of LIS programs within the university as based in librarianship. They note "the revolutionary position for an LIS program might be to declare its allegiance to librarianship and to focus itself on this objective. Within a framework, all manner of library and information science research can still be accomplished, but it will be done in a way that is understandable to our practitioners and to university faculty and administrators. It might work to reestablish the unifying culture LIS lost some twenty years ago" (p. 315).

It is the very unifying culture described by O'Connor and Mulvaney that the leaders quoted in the Benton Report identify. Yet this culture has been abjured amidst preoccupation with the mastery of technology. As the interstate highway ripped through the nation's cities these past decades, working class communities and inner city neighborhoods were torn by elevated lanes of cement. The fascination with arrival dominated the energies of engineers and urban planners. Similarly, librarianship has poured resources into getting information from faraway places and focused its energies on digital access while neighborhoods and commu-

nities languish. The library leaders cited in the Benton Report are right to identify community building as part of the core of values needed by librarians.

The professions are always under scrutiny. In his thoughtful volume, *The Careless Society*, John McKnight (1995) asks why the United States has become so dispirited. He observes that the usual solution—call for institutional reform—through addition of new technologies, notably new highways for information, will fail because the problem is not ineffective service-producing institutions but weak communities.

McKnight struggles to analyze why professional service providers have difficulty in building community. He identifies three main causes: (1) inefficiency—the more resources poured into service agencies, the less they seem to accomplish; (2) arrogance—secure civil service employment isolates the professional from having to care about clients; and (3) the iatrogenic argument—negative side effects of technical specialized professionalism are more harmful than good (pp. 18-21).

To become community builders, librarians must seek the intuitive spirit, strive for integration of service with peoples' needs, and reconnect the library with users of all types. The fragmentation of service from community in practice has come about because of the strong recent emphasis on technology. While technology has the long-term potential to open a vast storehouse of remote information to everyone, the outreached hand that brings in the child or the adult new reader may be pulled away to tap at a keyboard. It is all about balance.

To some degree, as we rush forward, we forget our history. It was only six years ago that the recommendations of 100,000 citizens were put forth at the 1991 White House Conference on Libraries and Information Services (McCook, 1993b). The goals and recommendations of that conference lend weight to the visions of library leaders for a just and productive society.

The evolving librarian, like the evolving health care worker, will use new technologies to provide better service. However, the technologies must be used with a strong commitment to long-standing goals and recognition that human skills are as critical as technological. If librarians are allowed to work in more flexible bureaucracies more oriented toward innovation, and if they see users as participants in collective efforts to solve community problems, the evolution of the librarian is well on the way (Rabrenovic, 1996, pp. 203, 212).

An Aggressive Public Education Campaign

In the summary at the end of the Benton Report, libraries are directed to "seize the opportunity and define their role with an aggressive public education campaign" (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 40). This plan

is a good one; not a new one, but a good one. However, the game has already begun.

A number of articles in the broadest possible circulation magazines have taken to task the movement of libraries into the digital age. Undoubtedly the most well-known are a pair of articles by Nicholson Baker (1994, 1996), "Discards" and "The Author vs. The Library," both of which appeared in *The New Yorker.* Baker's dissatisfaction with the San Francisco Public Library delineated in *The New Yorker* was catalyzed by a core of "traditionalist" librarians over the library's "desecration" (Golden, 1997, p. 1, 10:1). Kenneth Dowlin, director of the library, considered a visionary by many, the "father" of the new main library, rejuvenator of twenty-six branches, and implementer of computer technology, resigned on January 26, 1997. Though Dowlin's reasons included the city's handling of library finances, critics stated that Dowlin "sacrificed the library's basic mission in pursuit of his high-tech goal" (Epstein, 1997, A, 1:2).

Commenting on "vision" in his editorial of February 15, 1997, John N. Berry III, editor-in-chief of *Library Journal,* stated, "Ken Dowlin was just inducted into that relatively small "hall of fame" for visionaries who clung to and pursued their vision until it did them in" (p. 84). Berry also comments that close attention needs to be paid to the visions of the "former" library school programs that offer up newly created information systems courses to replace more traditional librarianship.

The Jeremiah of *Library Journal* intones: "Be warned that there is a growing divergence between these visions for an, as yet, ill-defined future and the realities and expectations of the librarian alumnae and the citizens they serve" (p. 84).

Indeed, Berry's admonitions were almost immediately realized by a February 17, 1997, *Newsweek* "My Turn" column, "A Tangled Info Web" by Ingrid Eisenstadter, science editor of *InJersey* in which the Science, Industry and Business Library of New York Public is criticized for difficulty of access. "Who made the decision," asks Eisenstadter, "that everyone who is not computer-literate—very computer literate, in the case of our new library—could be left out in the cold" (p. 16)?

And hot on the heels of *Newsweek* comes a March 1997 article in *Harper's* by Sallie Tisdale, "Silence, Please: The Public Library as Entertainment Center." Tisdale has done her homework. She has attended PLA and interviewed librarians. She has read through library literature which she finds, "strangely infatuated, unquestioning, reflecting a kind of data panic" (p. 68). Her article ends with the sad recognition that a Barnes & Noble bookstore reminds her of the library that was.

This is probably more "popular" press than the library has had in one concentrated time in decades, but it is not the right kind of publicity. The writer of the Benton Report was right, an aggressive campaign of

publicity is needed—but it is not needed to get out a message of our new directions, it is needed to assuage multifaceted attacks.

Bert R. Boyce (1997), dean of Louisiana State University, School of Library and Information Science and winner of the American Society for Information Science teaching award is to this writer a sensible sounding board on the information science side. He has suggested that the single most salient finding of the Benton Report was that the public does, indeed, want access to digital resources, but these need not be described as replacing traditional collections and services (Boyce, personal communication, February 27, 1997).

How is the message to be developed—ironically, through another Kellogg supported initiative that promises to clarify the issues alluded to in the Benton Report. Deanna B. Marcum (1996) has summarized a Council on Library Resources program to look more closely at public libraries that would attempt to explain how twelve especially innovative libraries are dealing with the new age of electronic information and how their communities are responding. But this study cannot be relegated to an academic report, it must be read as widely as the articles in *Newsweek*, *Harper's*, and *The New Yorker*.

A New Metaphor

Ours is not an age of anxiety. We do not fear that another great war will come and annihilate us into radioactive waste. Ours is an era of expectation. This is a time when transformations in the way we communicate, retrieve information, and store images are at a threshold of unprecedented change. While these new techniques offer new possibilities, they make us afraid that old traditions will shatter. There is intense dialog. There are those who wish to wire us all and start anew. There are those who believe that technologies will run parallel for a good long while. The challenge to us is to move forward without discarding the wonders of the past.

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